

Dedicated to the past

PLACING Northamptonshire firmly on the historical map of England could be one step closer with the planned development of a visitor centre at the site of the Battle of Naseby.

Last week, a group of historians and residents announced they had clubbed together to buy the historic site in the north-west of the county, giving hope to plans for a £10m tourist attraction.

There are currently platforms and an information board at the land but little else to entice visitors to the site or to raise its profile nationally.

The plan is to convert part of the 25-acre site into a visitor centre with an exhibition, library and study centre.

It will focus on the Battle of Naseby, which took place on June 14, 1645, and is classed as one of the most important battles ever fought on British soil.

It came after three years of conflict in the Civil War between King Charles I and parliamentary forces.



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After the Battle of Naseby, parliament, led by Oliver Cromwell, took control of the country while the king was found guilty of treason and beheaded.

The exhibition at this famous site could include items such as Sir Thomas Fairfax's battle maps and armour worn by Cromwell during the battle.

Andre Gonzalez de Savage, a member of the Naseby Battlefield Trust and a councillor for Northamptonshire County Council, said they hoped to emulate the success of the Bosworth Battlefield Heritage Centre in Leicestershire.

"It is a tremendous visitor centre which has been put together over a good piece of time," he said. "It includes an old barn converted into a restaurant and a presentation area. Coaches go there every day full of schoolchildren."

"We want to try to blend an awful lot of history by bringing it to life rather than a dull and boring exhibition."

But it is not all about the visitor centre as the trust wants to make sure people can get out and explore the site.

Councillor Gonzalez de Savage said: "We want to encourage people to walk around it and get them to understand the complexity of what actually happened."

The aim is also to reflect the different opinions and interpretations of what happened at the site.

"There always has been differing views," said councillor Gonzalez de Savage.

"We want to allow that and reflect it, therefore people can make up their own mind."

Plans for the visitor centre were first revealed in 2006 following years of criticism from historians that the battlefield was being ignored.

The site is also of international importance as Irish soldiers also fought and died there.

It is hoped the centre could be ready by the 2012 Olympics albeit in a temporary format with full completion by 2014 at the earliest.

Roy Friendship-Taylor, director of the Piddington Roman Museum, which opened in the county four years ago, said: "It can only be good for tourism for the region."

"We feel we are doing a little bit for that as well."

"It was about time Naseby was recognised."

HISTORICAL VISITOR CENTRES

THE Chronicle & Echo took a look at other historical visitor centres across Britain to see what the potential for Naseby could be:

Culloden Visitor Centre, Inverness

Historical significance: The battle of Culloden on April 16, 1746, was the final clash between the French-supported Jacobites and the Hanoverian British Government in the 1745 Jacobite Rising. It was the last land battle to be fought on mainland Britain. Culloden brought the Jacobite cause – to restore the House of Stuart to the throne of the Kingdom of Great Britain – to a decisive defeat.

Visitors: 15,000 since opening

Highlights: A battle zone where the events of the battle are played out before your eyes; a battle theatre where visitors can imagine what it was like to be at the centre of the action; and an interactive battlefield guide in multi-languages, which automatically triggers information to a hand-held device as you tour the battlefield. There are also displays of authentic weapons and artefacts found on the battlefield, and there are daily living history presentations, a restaurant and gift shop.

Background: The new £9.4m centre opened to the public last December and will have its official opening on April 16 to tie in with the battle date.

It was recently shortlisted for a Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) award. Through recent archaeological and historical research, The National Trust for Scotland discovered that the previous centre was sited on the third Government line of the battlefield. With the trust's resolve to return the battlefield to as close as possible, the centre was moved. The previous facilities had struggled to cope with visitor numbers at peak times and the site will be returned to being part of the battlefield.

Bannockburn Heritage Centre, Stirling

Historical significance: Site of battle in June 24, 1314, where Robert the Bruce routed the forces of King Edward II to win freedom for the Scots from English domination.

Visitors: More than 61,000 a year

Highlights: The Kingdom of the Scots exhibition brings the Wars of Independence to life, with scenes of the coronation of Robert the Bruce and the signing of the Declaration of Arbroath. There are figures of Wallace and Bruce, a large model of the Battle of Stirling Bridge and an audio-visual presentation which tells the story of Bruce and the battle. Display boards and photographs tell visitors about recent investigations to find the actual site of the battle. There is also a shop and Taste of Scotland award-winning cafe, plus an education room and car park with 200 spaces.

Background: Built in 1967. Nearby is the famous Borestone site which by tradition was



Bruce's command post before the battle and it is marked by an impressive equestrian statue by Pilkington Jackson.

Piddington Villa Museum, Northamptonshire

Historical significance: Piddington is the site of a Roman villa with artefacts dating from 800BC. More than three tonnes of pottery have been excavated from the grounds during the past 29 years. These are now housed in the museum, only yards away from the original villa site.

Cost: £500,000

Visitors: 4,000 to date since opening in 2004

Highlights: Welcoming guests to the building is a life-size model of the owner of the villa in Roman times, Tiberius Claudius Severus. In addition to the numerous display cabinets filled with pottery and household items, the museum also boasts an education room specifically for primary school-aged children studying the Romans as part of their curriculum.

Background: Until the 1990s, all artefacts were kept in Northampton Museum. However during this decade it was decided that the museum would only hold collections from the borough, meaning all the finds from Piddington village needed a new home. The chapel came up for sale in Piddington and The Upper Nene Archaeological Society raised the money to buy it. They received money from the Heritage Lottery fund to renovate the interior and the museum was opened in 2004 by Tony Robinson, from the *Time Team* television series.

Battle of Hastings Visitor Centre

Historical significance: The Battle of Hastings was the decisive victory in the Norman Conquest of England. The battle took place at Senlac Hill, approximately six miles north-west of Hastings, on which an abbey was subsequently built. The battle took place on October 14, 1066, between the Norman army of Duke William of Normandy, from France, and the English army, led by King Harold II. Harold was killed during the battle; traditionally, it is believed he was shot through



the eye with an arrow.

Highlights: The centre contains an interactive exhibition on the period of the battle, and an audio-visual presentation. The auditorium uses the latest audiovisual and computer technology to bring events to life. Visitors can also get hands-on experience of the weapons and armour of the period through interactive stations. An audio tour accompanies the battlefield and the site of Battle Abbey, built by William the Conqueror to atone for the bloodshed. The centre also houses a new cafe.

Background: An expanded centre opened in February 2007 next to the Battle Abbey and battlefield site.

Bosworth Battlefield Heritage Centre, Leics

Historical significance: The battle, which took place on August 22, 1485, brought an end to 30 years of English Civil War, now known as The War of the Roses and saw King Richard III lose both his life and crown to Henry Tudor.

Visitors: Expected to be 25,000 by 2009

Highlights: The interactive exhibits allow people to get a real hands-on experience including taking visitors through the preparations for battle, the battle itself and the aftermath. People can get involved with choosing a weapon and try it out, learn how to recruit and feed an army, and even dress up in battle dress or as peasants. There are also huge television screens giving accounts of the war throughout the exhibition, from "real" people including lords, soldiers and soldier's wives. There are giant wall murals and replica weapons, maps and pictures of battle. Visitors can pick up the weapons and test them out and even have a go at shooting an arrow from a longbow. There is a scientific investigation laboratory plus the Tithe Barn restaurant and Heritage Room for conferences. Outside, visitors can follow the king into battle along the Bosworth trail, a two-mile guided walk, or visit Ambion Parva, a recreation of a medieval village.

Background: Leicestershire County Council, which own the site, has spent the past three years revitalising the heritage centre through a £1.8m Heritage Lottery Fund.

